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Channeling the State : Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela

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Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela. Naomi Schiller. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018. 296 pp. \$ 99.95 hbk. \$29.95 pbk.

Reviewed by: Virpi Salojärvi, University of Helsinki, Finland

Much research on contemporary Venezuela circulates around the late President Hugo Chávez and thus allows the movement of "Chavismo" to crystalize around his persona. There is no reason to undermine Chávez's strong personal impact, but it is important to note that he did not create the movement alone. What is even more important is that he never would have gained the central position he occupies in the movement without the support of the masses.

Naomi Schiller's *Channeling the State: Community Media and Popular Politics in Venezuela* addresses this important issue. She makes explicit efforts to show the complex role of ordinary people in constructing both their identities and the movement of Chavismo in everyday practices, in a dialogic relation with state actors and their own communities. By approaching Chavismo "from below," the monograph joins the research tradition dominated especially by anthropologists who have explored the roles that the grassroots and communities played in the creation (and maybe the fall) of the Bolivarian Revolution.

The book is based on Schiller's extensive ethnographic fieldwork during 2006-2007 in probably the best-known Venezuelan community television station, Catia TVe, which has its roots in the Manicomio Film Club, but was officially launched in 2000 and based in a *barrio* (low-income urban area) of Caracas. Catia TVe was linked with the state—and Chavismo--both financially and ideologically, and it broadcast, in addition to programs made by the community for example Chávez's speeches and government advertisements. Catia TVe, like other Venezuelan community media projects during Chávez's era, never managed to capture broad audiences, but its significance was mostly in empowerment, community building, and identity construction among its volunteers and salaried workers.

However, Schiller does not merely focus on the Catia TVe community in the book; the core idea is to study what constitutes a nation state and to analyze it, not as a static entity, but as a constantly evolving process that consists in the everyday practices on both the institutional and non-institutional levels. Indeed, the book is at its best in describing the micro politics of Catia TVe workers negotiating everyday symbolic, ideological, and material practices that constituted the process of the Bolivarian Revolution.

Theoretical discussion in this book starts from the understanding of a state as a process and a site of hegemonic contestation of power. Thus, institutions are continuously made and remade. In the fourth chapter, "Channeling Chávez," the author briefly describes a theory of populism, confirming Ernesto Laclau's theory, which is in line with the theory of hegemony. However, the author does not fully develop the theoretical analysis of populism and hegemony in connection with Venezuelan society. The book will still be of interest in the context of the hegemony debate and may also contribute new insights to the study of social movements.

The book fills a research gap, especially in the case of Venezuela during Chávez's presidency, when there prevailed a parallel system of party politics and grassroots activism, both of which answered to Chávez himself, during an era when Chávez increasingly began to centralize more power to

himself. Thus, while the government became increasingly more authoritarian, making politics and constructing a state intertwined in many ways—not least due to corruption, clientelism, and a demand for loyalty. Hence, an ethnographic and empirical approach suits well in tackling everyday meaning-making and performing a state-constituting activism between liberal and socialist discourses. Yet, this is something that could have been opened up even more in the monograph.

Certain issues such as class, Chávez, gender issues, and press freedom as dealt with in their own separate chapters that give valuable insight into the different angles of the state-making processes. These issues are largely discussed within the context of Catia TVE and sometimes ViVe TV, which is an official state channel that cooperated with Catia TVE. They are not extended in detail, however, to the larger framework of hegemony, Venezuelan society, and the movement of Chavismo in the conclusion, as one might have expected. In this light, Schiller's ethnographic material would definitely have the potential for a broader perspective on Venezuelan society.

The book is at its best in the descriptions of micro politics, which also makes it easy to read. However, if the reader is not familiar with the overall societal context during the time of the research, she will have a hard time placing everything into a larger frame of the (media) politics of a polarized Venezuela. The book's strategy is to convey the valuable viewpoint of the community of Catia TVE and the urban poor; however, it does not aim to understand what was happening in Venezuela in a more layered perspective.

Moreover, since the book is published more than ten years after the fieldwork was done, it would have been interesting to read about the author's view of the Maduro era in more detail. More to the point, in the light of her extensive study, how does she see the first years of Maduro's regime and how might her results possibly explain the nuances of the fall of Maduro's popularity?

Overall, Schiller's book is a thorough description of how class and gender affect active citizenship and how these factors create constant conflict in everyday practices of meaning-making. *Channeling the State* can therefore be recommended especially to experts and students of anthropology, media and communication studies, and gender studies for its fresh insights and valuable perspective.